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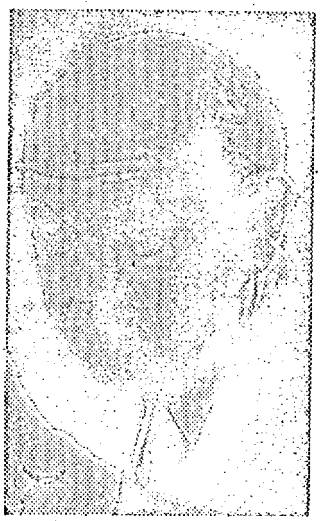
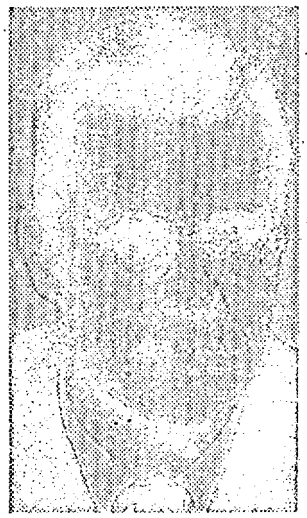
Johnson's Gallant Tuesday Cabinet

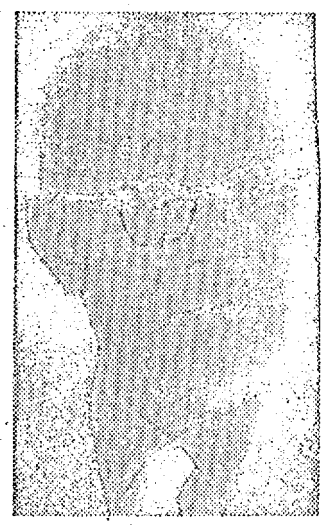
THE TUESDAY CABINET: Deliberation and Decision on Peace and War Under Lyndon B. Johnson. By Henry F. Graff. Prentice-Hall. Appendices, index. 200 pages. $6.95.



DEAN RUSK



ROBERT S. McNAMARA



EARLE G. WHEELER

The "Core" of President Johnson's "Tuesday Cabinet."

Almost every Tuesday during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, the President and his closest advisers met in the White House for lunch and discussed the foreign policy of the United States, more specifically the problems of Vietnam. The "Tuesday Cabinet" was a small group, and its composition changed from time to time. But Dean Rusk, Secretary of State; Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, and Gen. Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were the core. What they talked about with the President, the advice they offered, the options they considered, the alternatives they approved or rejected, the visions they had of the United States vis-a-vis the commitment to Vietnam — in short, the methods by which they contributed to the foreign policy decisions of Lyndon B. Johnson — are the subject of Henry Graff's absorbing study.

The insights and outlooks, the hopes and fears, the reservations and enthusiasms of the President himself and of those who helped him — Bill Moyers and George Christian, McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, plus the principals and others — are exposed in this significant work on how the Johnson administration grappled with Vietnam.

A historian at Columbia University, Graff interviewed the President and his Tuesday Cabinet from time to time over a period of four years, from 1965 to 1969. He saw these men individually, asked them questions, recorded their replies, often given at length, added his impressions of the personalities and of the circumstances of the moment, and wrapped his materials in historical context. In other words, Graff dates his interviews, and he keeps us informed on what happened in Vietnam between one interview and the next so that we can appreciate the changing situations out of which these men spoke. What we have then is the developing policy — the escalation, if you wish — presented briefly as the bedrock of our understanding, and the periodic ruminations of the men who helped the President shape that policy.

The result is an informal or conversational account of what the makers of American policy thought of their own handiwork. They believed, quite obviously, that they were right, that what they advocated was proper and good for the United States and the rest of the world, and that they would ultimately triumph. Their assumptions, their conception of the world, their appreciation of the international power struggle, their high intelligence, and their devotion to their country — as well as to a moral view of world events—are peculiarly American, particularly high-minded, and, sadly in the end, incomprehensibly wanting. For the fact of the matter is that somehow, despite their deep comprehension, their thorough debate, their moral approach, their competence, dedication, and sensitivity, they failed to bring the war to a close on terms acceptable to the American people and themselves.

Graff's narrative is sympathetic to President Johnson. In part this is a reflection of his ability to interview the principals in the Johnson administration, the welcome he received, the receptivity he met. But Graff is a professional historian, and he is very much aware of the pitfalls of interviewing intelligent people who are very much concerned with [illegible] sion, with presenting a favorable image. As a consequence, he is never taken; he is never sold a bill of goods; he is never imposed upon. He too is cool and perceptive, detached and wary. And the projection of his historical viewpoint, which comes through strongly and clearly, buttresses the essential rightness of the Johnson approach to Vietnam.

This is the essential tragedy of the Johnson administration. Men who sought to do right were defeated for reasons that are still unclear.

Graff offers no explanation for the failure. What he does is to document in a most convincing way the sincerity of the struggle with right and wrong that dominated the thoughts and actions of President Johnson and his advisers.

President Johnson emerges in Graff's pages as a strong, virile figure who suffered and agonized over Vietnam, who sought views along the entire spectrum of political judgment, and who was aware of the ambivalent impressions he produced among his countrymen and abroad. His portrait is sharp and vivid. Despite his tendency to ramble in talk, despite his Pedernales style and his Texas accent, despite his country manner, he stands tall, morally I mean, and brooding, a Lincolnesque figure marked by the best of intentions and a sense of tragic failure — and I believe that his stature as President will grow in the future to the proportions of our greatest Chief Executives.

Rusk, McNamara, and Wheeler — as well as George Ball and others — appear also as articulate, sensitive men who sought the best, who did their best, and who were, God knows how or why, defeated by a world that failed to understand the fundamental morality of their desires.

"Politics imitates history, indeed," writes Henry Graff, "just as life imitates art." Johnson and his men were schooled by Roosevelt and Truman. They "learned the value of firmness in conducting international relations" and the need to oppose military aggression. "But the study of history can be misleading, as well as instructive." It may simplify rather than clarify. Public servants "can be ensnared as well as inspired by the past."

The men of the Tuesday Cabinet "were strong, discerning, and gallant." They "believed deeply in the political system that produced them, the cultural inheritance that nourished them, and the usefulness of the light and succor that American idealism and materialism can offer the world."

Why they were unable to resolve the tormenting issues of Vietnam that hypnotize us still remains for the reader to speculate upon. The record of Graff's conversations with them provides more than ample food for thought.

I was captivated by this very personal encounter, and I [illegible] most Americans will find Graff's reportage and observations fascinating and instructive.

MARTIN PLUMMER